

The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars

David Bowie
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BY RICHARD CROMELIN

Upon the release of David Bowie's most thematically ambitious, musically coherent album to date, the record in which he unites the major strengths of his previous work and comfortably reconciles himself to some apparently inevitable problems, we should all say a brief prayer that his fortunes are not made to rise and fall with the fate of the "drag-rock" syndrome—that thing that's manifesting itself in the self-conscious quest for decadence which is all the rage at the moment in trendy Hollywood, in the more contrived area of Alice Cooper's presentation, and, way down in the pits, in such grotesqueries as Queen, Nick St. Nicholas' trio of feathered, sequined Barbie dolls. And which is bound to get worse.

For although Lady Stardust himself has probably had more to do with androgyny's current fashionableness in rock than any other individual, he has never made his sexuality anything more than a completely natural and integral part of his public self, refusing to lower it to the level of gimmick but never excluding it from his image and craft. To do either would involve an artistically fatal degree of compromise.

Which is not to say that he hasn't had a great time with it. Flamboyance and outrageousness are inseparable from that campy image of his, both in the Bacall and Garbo stages and in his new butch, street-crawler appearance that has him looking like something out of the darker pages of *City of Night*. It's all tied up with the one aspect of David Bowie that sets him apart from both the exploiters of transvestitism and writer-performers of comparable talent—his theatricality.

The news here is that he's managed to get that sensibility down on vinyl, not with an attempt at pseudo-visualism (which, as Mr. Cooper has shown, just doesn't cut it), but through employment of broadly mannered styles and deliveries, a boggling variety of vocal nuances that provide the program



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with the necessary depth, a verbal acumen that is now more economic and no longer clouded by storms of psychotic, frenzied music, and, finally, a thorough command of the elements of rock & roll. It emerges as a series of concise vignettes designed strictly for the ear.

Side two is the soul of the album, a kind of psychological equivalent of *Lola vs. Powerman* that delves deep into a matter close to David's heart: What's it all about to be a rock & roll star? It begins with the slow, fluid "Lady Stardust," a song in which currents of frustration and triumph merge in an overriding desolation. For though "He was alright, the band was altogether" (sic), still "People stared at the makeup on his face/Laughed at his long black hair, his animal grace." The pervading bittersweet melancholy that wells out of the contradictions and that Bowie beautifully captures with one of the album's more direct vocals conjures the picture of a painted harlequin under the

spot-light of a deserted theater in the darkest hour of the night.

"Star" springs along handsomely as he confidently tells us that "I could make it all worthwhile as a rock & roll star." Here Bowie outlines the dazzling side of the coin: "So inviting—so enticing to play the part." His singing is a delight, full of mocking intonations and backed way down in the mix with excessive, marvelously designed "Oooooohh la la la"s and such that are both a joy to listen to and part of the parodic undercurrent that runs through the entire album.

"Hang on to Yourself" is both a kind warning and an irresistible erotic rocker (especially the hand-clapping chorus), and apparently Bowie has decided that since he just can't avoid cramming too many syllables into his lines, he'll simply master the rapid-fire, tongue-twisting phrasing that his failing requires. "Ziggy Stardust" has a faint ring of *The Man Who Sold the World* to it—stately, measured, fuzzily electric. A tale of intra-group jealousies, it features some

of Bowie's more adventuresome imagery, some of which is really the nazz: "So we bitched about his fans and should we crush his sweet hands?"

David Bowie's supreme moment as a rock & roller is "Suffragette City," a relentless, spirited Velvet Underground-styled rush of chomping guitars. When that second layer of guitar roars in on the second verse you're bound to be a goner, and that priceless little break at the end—a sudden cut to silence from a mighty crescendo, Bowie's voice oozing out as a brittle, charged "Ooooooh Wham Bam Thank You Ma'am!" followed hard by two raspy guitar bursts that suck you back into the surging meat of the chorus—will surely make your tum do somersaults. And as for our Star, well, now "There's only room for one and here she comes, here she comes."

But the price of playing the part must be paid, and we're precipitously tumbled into the quietly terrifying despair of "Rock & Roll Suicide." The broken singer drones:

"Time takes a cigarette, puts it in your mouth/Then you pull on your finger, then another finger, then your cigarette." But there is a way out of the bleakness, and it's realized with Bowie's Lennon-like scream: "You're not alone, gimme your hands/You're wonderful, gimme your hands." It rolls on to a tumultuous, impassioned climax, and though the mood isn't exactly sunny, a desperate, possessed optimism asserts itself as genuine, and a new point from which to climb is firmly established.

Side one is certainly less challenging, but no less enjoyable from a musical standpoint. Bowie's favorite themes—Mortality ("Five Years," "Soul Love"), the necessity of reconciling oneself to Pain (those two and "It Ain't Easy"), the New Order vs. the Old in sci-fi garments ("Starman")—are presented with a consistency, a confidence, and a strength in both style and technique that were never fully realized in the lashing *The Man Who Sold the World* or the uneven and too often stringy *Hunky Dory*.

Bowie initiates "Moonage Daydream" on side one with a riveting bellow of "I'm an alligator" that's delightful in itself but which also has a lot to do with what *Rise and Fall* . . . is all about. Because in it there's the perfect touch of self-mockery, a lusty but forlorn bravado that is the first hint of the central duality and of the rather spine-tingling questions that rise from it: Just how big and tough is your rock & roll star? How much of him is bluff and how much inside is very frightened and helpless? And is this what comes of our happily dubbing someone as "bigger than life"?

David Bowie has pulled off his complex task with consummate style, with some great rock & roll (the Spiders are Mick Ronson on guitar and piano, Mick Woodmansey on drums and Trevor Bolder on bass; they're good), with all the wit and passion required to give it sufficient dimension and with a deep sense of humanity that regularly emerges from behind the Star facade. The important thing is that despite the formidable nature of the undertaking, he hasn't sacrificed a bit of entertainment value for the sake of message.

I'd give it at least a 99.